Fashion Entrepreneurs: Evaluating an Experiential Learning Model in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of an experiential fashion entrepreneurship program on Thai undergraduate students' entrepreneurial development. Implemented over five months at a public university, the program engaged 40 students in hands-on learning activities including business model development, garment production, digital marketing, and a fashion showcase. Participants were mentored by practicing fashion entrepreneurs and worked in teams to create and pitch their product lines.

The research used a mixed-methods design to measure changes in students' entrepreneurial aspirations, engagement, and readiness. Quantitative data were collected through adapted instruments based on McClelland's competency framework and Hassan's motivation scale. Qualitative insights were gathered from journals, observations, and feedback sessions.

Findings indicated that students developed moderate-to-high levels of aspiration and readiness, with a significant positive correlation between engagement and entrepreneurial intent. Qualitative responses highlighted increased confidence, creativity, and motivation, though technical and time constraints posed challenges. Mentorship and team support were identified as key enablers.

This study contributes to entrepreneurship education by demonstrating how culturally relevant, practice-based models can foster motivation and competency among non-business students. It recommends that Thai universities integrate flexible, creative-industry programs to enhance entrepreneurial outcomes in alignment with national development goals.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Experiential Learning, Fashion, Thailand, Student Engagement, Entrepreneurial Readiness.

1 Introduction

Thailand's national strategy to transition toward a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy has amplified the role of entrepreneurship within higher education. Policies such as *Thailand 4.0* and the *20-Year Higher Education Plan (2017–2036)* emphasize entrepreneurial capacity as a pathway to reduce graduate underemployment and stimulate national competitiveness (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2018). Despite these efforts,

many Thai graduates remain hesitant to pursue self-employment. While youth unemployment in Thailand remains relatively low, underemployment and a mismatch between qualifications and job roles persist (National Statistical Office, 2022).

Universities have responded by integrating entrepreneurship education into various academic programs. However, many of these efforts remain theory-based, lacking the experiential components that foster real-world application. Prior studies show immersive, hands-on learning environments are more effective in shaping entrepreneurial behavior (Neck & Greene, 2011), particularly when combining business skills with personal development and creative problem-solving (Nabi et al., 2018; Gibb, 2011). Overcoming barriers such as fear of failure (Dhliwayo, 2008), limited networks (Linton & Klinton, 2019), or cultural reluctance (Dana, 2007) requires educational formats that build both competence and confidence through action (Ndou et al., 2018).

In this context, a fashion start-up presents a unique opportunity. Thailand's fashion and textile sector—rooted in local traditions (Chai-Arayalert & Suttapong, 2020) but increasingly shaped by digital commerce—offers an accessible and relevant industry for youth entrepreneurs.

Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and LINE Shop have enabled Thai students to experiment with microbusinesses, particularly in clothing and accessories (UNCTAD, 2020). However, many of these ventures remain informal or unsustainable due to limited business planning, branding, and production knowledge. As Cheewatrakoolpong and Ariyasajjakorn (2018) note, formal education must bridge the gap between creative interests and long-term entrepreneurial viability.

This study explores the outcomes of a five-month experiential fashion entrepreneurship program delivered at a public Thai university. Grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, the program was designed to guide students through the entire business process—from ideation and production to marketing and product launch. Students were mentored by practicing fashion entrepreneurs and worked in groups to develop and present their own brand and garment line, culminating in a fashion showcase and pitch session.

The research focuses on three key constructs: entrepreneurial aspiration, defined as students' interest and motivation to pursue business ownership; entrepreneurial engagement, which reflects their participation and emotional investment; and entrepreneurial readiness, indicating their confidence and competencies to start a business. By examining how these elements shift through experiential learning, the study offers insight into how Thai universities can design programs that not only teach entrepreneurship but cultivate it as a practical and desirable career path.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Experiential Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education has evolved to emphasize the development of cognitive and behavioral competencies (Katz & Shepherd, 2003), that support opportunity recognition and value creation. Rooted in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Hynes' (1996) model of entrepreneurial learning, effective entrepreneurship education is understood as a cycle of action, reflection, and adaptation. It is not enough to teach theories in isolation; rather, students must apply knowledge in real-world contexts where uncertainty, creativity, and decision-making intersect (Leibowitz et al., 2010). Gibb (2011) underscored the need for pedagogies that simulate entrepreneurial conditions—namely ambiguity, innovation, and ownership—arguing that such conditions are critical to producing graduates who think and act

entrepreneurially. Jones and English (2004) proposed that entrepreneurship education should equip individuals not only with technical skills but with the self-belief and perspective necessary to pursue business opportunities. In Thailand, similar principles have been adopted by the *Thailand Education Reform Plan* and *Thailand 4.0* policy, which advocate for student-centered learning and integration of real-world challenges into the curriculum (Office of the Education Council, 2020). Despite these reforms, however, entrepreneurship education often remains textbook-driven and lacks immersive components (Cheewatrakoolpong & Ariyasajjakorn, 2018).

While formal instruction builds foundational knowledge, it does not necessarily translate into entrepreneurial aspiration, or the sustained desire to create and lead a venture. Numerous studies have found that experiential models—such as business simulations, start-up incubators, and industry-led mentorship—have a greater influence on shifting student mindset and behavior (Chang & Rieple, 2013; Nabi et al., 2018). In Thailand, where many students lack prior exposure to entrepreneurial role models or family businesses, applied learning strategies become even more critical (Lee, 2005). These strategies enable students to develop entrepreneurial engagement, moving beyond passive interest to active exploration, experimentation, and networking. Linan, Rodriguez-Cohard, and Rueda-Cantuche (2011) argued that when students interact with real business environments, their confidence to pursue entrepreneurship increases. Likewise, Nabi et al. (2018) emphasize that entrepreneurial learning is driven by two forms of inspiration: theoretical, which arises from academic inputs and discussions; and practical, which stems from direct interaction with entrepreneurial tasks. For example, students asked to launch a micro-venture or develop a product prototype often experience significant shifts in entrepreneurial identity. These shifts, when scaffolded by supportive mentors and structured reflection, contribute to stronger entrepreneurial readiness, which refers to an individual's perceived capability to act on entrepreneurial intentions.

In Southeast Asia, there is growing recognition that one-size-fits-all models of entrepreneurship education are insufficient. National differences in economic structure, labor markets, and educational culture shape how programs must be localized. Thailand faces a unique mix of challenges and opportunities. While digital tools and social media platforms have expanded entrepreneurial access, traditional hierarchies and academic rigidity often prevent full adoption of experiential models (UNCTAD, 2020). Integrating informal learning pathways into university programming remains a policy and design challenge, especially in public institutions. McClelland's (1985) study on entrepreneurial behavior introduced 13 personal competencies—such as initiative, persistence, problem-solving, and strategic planning—that remain core to the definition of entrepreneurial readiness. These competencies must be cultivated through repetition, failure, mentorship, and critical feedback. Studies in both Western and Asian contexts confirm that entrepreneurial behavior emerges not from knowledge alone, but from behavior rehearsal in real or simulated conditions (Bird, 1998; Rasmussen & Sørheim, 2006). The higher education programs in Thailand, however, many entrepreneurship modules still emphasize case studies and theoretical frameworks, or very little public exposure such as consignment, commercial-based international fair approach, limiting opportunities for students to acquire these practical competencies through meaningful trial-and-error (Cheewatrakoolpong & Ariyasajjakorn, 2018).

Mentorship emerges as a particularly valuable feature in experiential entrepreneurship education. Chang and Rieple (2013) demonstrated that live projects involving real business owners accelerate entrepreneurial skill development and increase students' confidence. Such mentorship bridges the gap between classroom learning and professional practice, while also providing access to industry networks and funding ecosystems. In Thailand, partnerships

between universities and creative industries, such as design, crafts, and fashion, are increasingly used to contextualize entrepreneurship for students in non-business fields (OECD, 2021).

2.2 Fashion Entrepreneurship as a Learning Context

Fashion is an ideal pedagogical medium for entrepreneurship training due to its cross-disciplinary nature and cultural relevance. It combines creative expression with market dynamics and enables students to experience the full business cycle—from product ideation and branding to pricing and promotion. The fashion sector also intersects with cultural preservation and tourism, providing students with locally meaningful opportunities for innovation. Traditional Thai textiles, for instance, are being reimagined through contemporary design to attract domestic and global markets (Chaiyawat & Phongpaichit, 2021).

Yet despite fashion's growing relevance, few entrepreneurship programs in Thailand leverage it as a formal learning context. Zhang, Duysters, and Cloodt (2013) noted that most entrepreneurship education research focuses on general business content, with limited attention to creative industries. This gap is critical, especially given the increasing number of Thai students engaged in informal fashion commerce through digital platforms like Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, and TikTok Shop. Although these platforms make it easier to get started, they don't replace the need for deeper knowledge in areas like pricing, production planning, brand development, or managing customer relationships. Without clear direction or support, many of these small ventures struggle to grow and often shut down early.

The development of entrepreneurial aspiration, engagement, and readiness in fashion contexts requires intentional program design that integrates creative processes with entrepreneurial thinking. This includes hands-on workshops in design and production, as well as e-commerce training, mentorship with local entrepreneurs, and structured peer collaboration. Programs that situate fashion entrepreneurship within the wider goals of economic inclusion and sustainable development, such as those aligned with the Bio-Circular-Green Economy model (Reim et al., 2019), resonate with Thailand's broader policy goals. While research on entrepreneurship education in Thai universities is expanding, there remains a paucity of studies examining domain-specific interventions. This study contributes by evaluating a fashion-focused, practice-based entrepreneurship program that not only reflects the realities of the local creative economy but also empowers students through tangible, culturally relevant outcomes. This study looks at aspiration, engagement, and readiness not as a single measure, but as related parts of the learning process. Framing them this way gives a clearer view of how entrepreneurship education is taking shape in Thailand's changing university landscape.

3 Research Methodology

The mixed-methods design was used to investigate the outcomes of a fashion entrepreneurship program on students' entrepreneurial aspiration, engagement, and readiness. The approach allowed for quantitative measurement alongside qualitative insights from participants' lived experiences throughout the program.

3.1 Participant Selection

The research was conducted at CIDI Chanapatana Design Institute in Thailand during 2024 (from 07/2024 to 09/2024), with 5 months of intensive training including coursework and a project-based approach, leading to a fashion show for public attention and a collaborative pop-up store in the Icon Siam department store within 30 days month on December 2024. Purposive

sampling selected 40 undergraduate students enrolled in an entrepreneurship project-based course, the English program. Participants represented various fields of study, including fashion design, textile design, and fashion marketing and merchandising. A screening process was conducted: 1) A semi-structured interview assessing interest and motivation for entrepreneurship, 2) A basic sewing proficiency test to evaluate readiness for hands-on fashion production. Only students who met the minimum requirements and committed to the five-month program were included.

3.2 Instruments for Quantitative Data

Three quantitative instruments were employed to assess students' entrepreneurial development. The first was the Entrepreneurial Readiness Questionnaire, adapted from McClelland and McBer & Co. (1985). This instrument measured 13 personal competencies commonly associated with entrepreneurial behavior, including initiative, systematic planning, problem-solving, efficiency orientation, and persistence. It consisted of 50 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The second instrument was the Aspiration and Engagement Scale, adapted from Hassan (2007). This tool assessed students' interest in pursuing entrepreneurial careers (aspiration) and their emotional and behavioral involvement in the program (engagement). The scale comprised 16 items in total—5 items measuring aspiration and 11 measuring engagement—using a 5-point scale from 1 (Not Capable) to 5 (Very Capable).

The researchers developed the third instrument, the Program Implementation Evaluation, to measure participants' perceptions of the program's quality, relevance, and overall delivery. It included 25 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For data interpretation, mean scores were categorized as follows: low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00). The reliability of all constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Reliability of All Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Entrepreneurial Aspiration	5	.79
Entrepreneurial Engagement	11	.76
Entrepreneurial Readiness	50	.87
Program Implementation Evaluation	25	.90

3.3 Qualitative Data and Thematic Structure

In parallel, qualitative data were collected through: 1) Ongoing participant observations; 2) Mentor feedback; 3) Group debrief sessions after each program phase; 4) Participant journals submitted at program conclusion. These sources were guided by a thematic framework focusing on students' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive experiences during the program. Table 3 outlines the domains explored.

Table 3 – *Key Concepts and Focus of Qualitative Questions*

Key Concept	Focus Questions/Prompts
Motivation and Aspiration	*What inspired you to join this program? Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?*
Learning Engagement	*Which parts of the program were most meaningful or*

	challenging for you?
Skill Development	*What new skills have you gained (technical, planning, communication)?*
Barriers and Enablers	*What challenges did you face? What helped you stay involved?*
Confidence and Future Readiness	*How do you feel about running a business after this experience?*
These themes were used to code participant reflections and group feedback, supporting triangulation with quantitative results.	

3.4 Data Analysis

SPSS was used for quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized mean scores across constructs, while Pearson's correlation examined relationships between aspiration, engagement, and readiness. For the qualitative strand, data were transcribed and coded thematically based on Table 3. Patterns were identified and cross-referenced with quantitative findings to provide depth and explanation of student outcomes.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Quantitative Results

The study sample consisted of 40 Thai undergraduate students from various academic programs. The distribution by gender is shown in Table 4. The sample was predominantly female.

Table 4 – Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	4	10.0%
Female	36	90.0%

As shown in Figure 1, most respondents had been exposed to entrepreneurship education (80%) in theory and related training (75%) also in theory before the program. However, just over half had actual entrepreneurial experience (52.5%), primarily in informal fashion-related online sales through family business, very small, and joint projects with friends.

Figure 1 – Respondent Background in Entrepreneurship

	Yes	***No***
Entrepreneurship Course	32	8
Training Participation	30	10
Business Experience	21	19

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for the four key constructs measured. Participants reported high levels of **readiness** (M = 3.82), positive **evaluation** of the program (M = 4.01), moderate-to-high **aspiration** (M = 3.62), and moderate **engagement** (M = 3.35).

Table 5 – Mean and Standard Deviation of Key Constructs

Construct	*Mean*	Standard Deviation
Entrepreneurial Aspiration	*3.62*	0.59
Entrepreneurial Readiness	*3.82*	0.27
Entrepreneurial Engagement	*3.35*	0.34
Program Implementation Score	*4.01*	0.45

Further analysis of the 13 readiness sub-constructs (*Table 6*) indicates that students scored highest in *information-seeking*, *task commitment*, and *efficiency orientation*. The lowest scores were in *persuasion* and *self-confidence*, suggesting areas for development.

Table 6 – Mean and Standard Deviation of Readiness Constructs

Readiness Competency	**Mean**	***Standard Deviation***
Initiative	3.64	0.37
Opportunity Seeking	3.93	0.42
Persistence	3.87	0.41
Information Seeking	4.13	0.41
Quality Orientation	4.04	0.42
Task Commitment	4.08	0.33
Efficiency Orientation	4.11	0.39
Systematic Planning	4.05	0.40
Problem Solving	3.77	0.36
Self-Confidence	3.61	0.59
Assertiveness	3.64	0.46
Persuasion	3.44	0.47
Influence Strategy	3.71	0.49
Correlation analysis (*Table 7)* revealed a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial engagement and aspiration (r = .374, $p < .05$). However, no statistically significant correlation was found between program participation and either aspiration or readiness.		

Table 7 – Pearson Correlation Between Key Constructs

Variable	Aspiration	Readiness
Entrepreneurial Engagement	.375*	.217
Program Implementation Score	.269	.067
*$p < .05$ (2-tailed)		

4.2 Qualitative Result

Observational and journal data revealed a range of student experiences throughout the five-month program. Enthusiasm was particularly high during the initial seminar and branding workshops, where students collaborated on naming, logo design, and digital marketing strategies for their group businesses. These activities fostered strong engagement, especially as students saw their concepts take visible shape on platforms like Instagram. As one student

reflected, *"Creating the logo made it feel like our brand was real, not just a class task."*

Greater challenges emerged during Phase 3, which required students to produce a garment aligned with the theme "Contemporary Thai Eveningwear." Scheduling conflicts and varying levels of sewing proficiency impacted participation during this stage. Some participants admitted feeling discouraged: *"I used a sewing machine before, but normally I do not have that stress on timeline-commitment, and by reaching the deadline, it was frustrating at first,"* shared one student. However, strong team dynamics and mentor support helped many continue. Several mentors opened their studios on weekends or provided virtual consultations. *"Our mentor did not let us give up easily. She reminded us why we started,"* another student recalled.

By the end of the program, all students were fully engaged again. Each group completed their garments and delivered business pitches at the final fashion show, as well as the projection for consignment at a department store. Several students said that presenting their work in front of others changed how they saw themselves. The results were impressive—many of the final pieces showed a level of creativity and quality that went beyond what was expected, especially given the short timeline and the students' varied academic experience. The most responses to: *"Even though I'm not ready to start a full business yet, I now know the first steps—how to register, how to price, and how to build a small brand online, especially understand about the importance of team work or organization*.," and "*The fashion show, and the consignment opportunity in leading department store made me realize I created something from zero. Presenting my product to the panel gave me a level of confidence I didn't have before.*"

Three core themes emerged from the qualitative data for entrepreneurial aspiration, engagement, and readiness, which mirrored the quantitative constructs measured. Student responses demonstrated increasing confidence, motivation to pursue entrepreneurship, and the acquisition of practical business and creative skills. The quotes that follow illustrate these key themes in students' voices.

5 Discussion

This study investigates how a five-month experiential fashion entrepreneurship program shaped Thai undergraduates' entrepreneurial aspiration, engagement, and readiness. The findings confirm that project-practice-based, culturally relevant learning environments can foster both motivation and skill development among non-business students.

Participants reported high levels of entrepreneurial readiness (M = 3.82), particularly in competencies such as information seeking (M = 4.13), task commitment (M = 4.08), and efficiency orientation (M = 4.11) (Table 6). These outcomes suggest that the program supported key behavioral attributes often associated with successful entrepreneurs. Prior studies show that entrepreneurial competencies are strengthened through experience-based projects where students must take initiative and respond to real constraints (Man, Lau, & Chan, 2002; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). However, lower scores in persuasion (M = 3.44) and self-confidence (M = 3.61) indicate that interpersonal abilities require more structured development—an issue particularly noted in Asian higher education settings where risk-aversion and hierarchical norms may inhibit expressive learning (Chen, Greene, & Crick, 1998).

Students who were more involved in the activities tended to express more substantial interest in starting a business. This pattern was supported by the data ($r = .375$, $p < .05$; Table 7), pointing to a link between participation and personal drive. This aligns with research by Fayolle and Gailly (2015), who argue that engagement in experiential tasks, rather than content alone, is what drives shifts in entrepreneurial mindset (Kaffka& Krueger, 2018). Conversely,

no significant correlations were found between program implementation and aspiration or readiness. This may reflect external constraints such as scheduling challenges and limited technical preparation, both of which were identified in student journals and group debriefs. Gielnik et al. (2015) similarly noted that while training programs can enhance competencies, time, mentor quality, and alignment with student availability greatly influence outcomes.

The qualitative feedback helped shed light on the patterns observed in the results. Many students were most engaged during the early brand-building sessions, where they worked together on naming their labels, designing logos, and planning how to present their products. This part of the program seemed to help them connect with the idea of entrepreneurship on a more personal level (Rae, 2005). As the course moved into the garment-making stage, participation began to dip. Students pointed to tight academic schedules and varying levels of sewing ability as reasons for falling behind. Similar challenges have been noted in other studies, where hands-on programs struggle to keep students involved without enough guidance or support for technical tasks (Nabi & Holden, 2008). Mentor involvement played a critical role in sustaining participation (Hudson, 2013). Students frequently cited mentors as motivators who provided emotional support, technical advice, and reminders of group purpose. Such mentorship aligns with the conclusions of Lepoutre and Valente (2012), who emphasize that near-peer or practitioner guidance enhances persistence in real-world entrepreneurship simulations.

By the final showcase and pitch session, all participants had re-engaged. Student reflections described a shift in confidence and entrepreneurial identity: *"Even though I'm not ready to start a full business yet, I now know the first steps…"* This transformation aligns with experiential learning theory, particularly the process of reflection-on-action (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Presenting their work at the final exhibition gave students a chance to see their efforts acknowledged beyond the classroom. It offered a sense of validation and helped them see the practical value of what they had created. While not every outcome reached statistical significance, the program clearly supported growth in aspiration and engagement, largely through hands-on learning and the steady presence of mentors. These findings support broader calls to embed experiential, culturally contextualized entrepreneurship education (Martinelli, 20024) into undergraduate curricula, especially in design and creative fields where tangible outputs can reinforce entrepreneurial confidence and behavior (Pittaway & Cope, 2007,).

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how an experiential fashion entrepreneurship program influenced Thai undergraduate students in terms of aspiration, engagement, and readiness. The results indicated high readiness in planning and task-related competencies, and a clear link between engagement and entrepreneurial aspiration. Students shared that branding work, mentor support, and the final fashion showcase contributed to their motivation and confidence, especially with a commercial project-based work. At the same time, limited interpersonal development and time constraints affected participation during production phases. The study was limited by its sample size, with only 40 students, a short duration of 5 months, and a focus on one institution. Future research should involve more diverse participants and explore similar experiential programs in other creative fields such as crafts, digital media, or hospitality.

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